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ABSTRACT

Biography is a form of nonfiction that, when well-researched and well-written, can be as enjoyable and as engaging as the best of novels. The quality of these books can be judged by the quality of writing and by the honesty and accuracy in the presentation of the subject. There has to be in the text or in supporting materials some assurance that the writer has researched the subject adequately. Although biography means literally "life writing," no biographer presents a complete portrait of an individual's life. Some biographers work from firsthand experiences with their subjects, as in the case of James Boswell's recording the "life" of Samuel Johnson. Truth remains a vital element of biography of any kind, though this has not always been practiced. For example, Parson Weems endowed George Washington with legendary honesty through the cherry tree episode. Publishers have much to say about the nature of the biographies they publish for young readers. Biography may also be found in the comic book realm, and some receive a special boost through the success of films. Biographies can be a deeply felt and deeply thoughtful reading experience. (HOD)

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Adolescent Literature Is More Than the YA Novel: Making a Case for Biography

The young adult novel enjoys great popularity among teen and pre-teen readers, and it receives ever increasing attention among scholars and critics. However, we must remember that there is more to adolescent literature than the young adult novel. I wish to make a case here for biography as a form of nonfiction that, when well researched and well written, can be as enjoyable and as engaging as the best of novels.

My appreciation for this form goes back to my pre-teen and teenage years when my personal interest in history took me not only to factual accounts of Virginia's evolution and revolution but also to biographical materials about key personalities in my state's history. As a teenager I was very fascinated by Napoleon, and I read widely about his rise and fall. My favorite reading was Emil Ludwig's biography for its close attention to the personal details of Napoleon's life. I was a young romantic then, and I was moved that Napoleon could love his Josephine with such intensity that he could write, "To die without being loved by you, to die without that certitude, is the living, terrifying vision of total annihilation." Obviously, I had a lot to learn about love and human behavior, but I remember entering these words in my journal for posterity.

My interest in biography for young adults was intensified during

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the three years I served as chair of the NCTE Committee to Revise High Interest-Easy Reading (1984). Like most of you, my academic experience had previously been confined to literary biography, specifically the works of Samuel Johnson, James Boswell, Lytton Strachey, Leon Edel, and others. In my editorial role I was suddenly confronted by a variety of young adult biographies of sports stars, rock stars, movie and television personalities, and an assortment of historical and contemporary figures in art, literature, politics, etc.

By what criteria does one judge the quality of these books? It was not difficult for the members of our committee to agree, in addition to the obvious criteria of high interest and ease of reading, that quality of writing and honesty and accuracy in the presentation of the subject would be essential. In the latter a teacher or librarian cannot always be knowledgeable enough to make this judgment easily. There has to be in the text or in supporting materials some assurance that the writer has researched the subject adequately.

Researching a subject for a biographical treatment can take several directions, as the following examples show. Recently, I had the pleasure of reading Neil Baldwin's To All Gentleness: William Carlos Williams, The Doctor Poet (Atheneum, 1984). Not only does Baldwin have an intimate knowledge of Williams' life and works through his cataloging for SUNY-Buffalo the papers Williams had donated to its library, but Baldwin also brings to his task a long admiration of Williams' writing coupled with his own personal achievements as a scholar and creative writer. Baldwin's book is tempered by objectivity so that we can see in proper perspective the lifelong tension that existed between Williams

the physician and Williams the poet. The focus runs throughout the book, and we come away feeling that we have been in close touch with Williams, that we have shared his joys and his frustrations as a doctor, as a poet, and as a person. Baldwin's biography of Williams is not one that may have wide appeal among young readers, but it is an excellent model of what good biography for young adults can achieve.

Timeliness is an essential element in so many biogaphies written for young readers. After all, publishers must sell their books. However, an urgency to capitalize on a person's popularity often leads to hastily written treatments of someone in the public eye. Consider my second example.

In her article, "The Unauthorized Juvenile Biography" (The Writer, October, 1979), Gloria D. Miklowitz describes how she went about researching a juvenile biography on Nadia Comaneci for Tempo Books. She writes:

> Nadia had just made history at the Olympics by being the first gymnast to be judged perfect (receiving a score of 10 from each of the judges). With a go-ahead and a six-week deadline (cut to two because of my vacation plans), I set to work. In two weeks I had to learn enough to write 7,500 information- and action-packed words in six chapters. (pp. 15-16)

She goes on to describe her process, beginning with reviewing The Los Angeles Times' coverage for the sequence of Nadia's achievements and continuing with her efforts to learn more about gymnastics: the training and preparation involved, the key terms, and insights from a coach's perspective. The process was one she used to write juvenile biographies

on tennis star Tracy Austin and jockey Steve Cauthen. She concludes her article by likening it to a scavenger hunt.

> With curiosity, persistence, and a modicum of ingenuity, you can find the clues which, when followed, lead to the goodies--the live anecdotes, the facts, the photos. When you put them all together with sharp action verbs and a bit of grace in your prose, you have a chance to draw a blood-and-guts, three-dimensional personality without ever having met the person. (p. 45)

My intent here is not to disparage Miklowitz or her books, or to attack unauthorized biographies. I merely wish to show two diverse approaches to the writing of biography for young adults. Baldwin's book reflects his personal concern for Williams and represents an intensive process not only of studying existing documents but also of interviewing key people who knew Williams intimately, including his wife.

While Miklowitz came to admire her subject, she was nevertheless following a formula, complete with "hook" sentences at the end of each chapter to move the reader along. Her biography of Nadia shows an obvious awareness of audience, and its length and subject matter address a broader age range. Such books do fill a need for young readers who wish to re-live those dramatic moments they may have seen on television, and they do provide these readers with background information about and cameo glances into the private lives of celebrities. But to what extent do these books represent true biography?

Biography means literally "life writing," but common sense tells us that no biographer presents a complete portrait of an individual's

life. Some biographers work from firsthand experiences with their subjects, as in the case of James Boswell's recording for us the "life" of Samuel Johnson. Even then we know that Boswell's account is not the complete life of Johnson, but it is sufficient to give us a feel for the man. We have the life of Jesus recorded in the four Gospels, but we know that the process of selection of details in each varies so that we do not rely on any one to the exclusion of others for our understanding of him.

In his book, Literary Biography (Doubleday Anchor, 1959) Leon Edel identifies what he calls three "Architectural Ideas" in the structure of biographies. In the documentary biography materials are arranged to keep the voice of the subject in the foreground, as Boswell did with Johnson. The second is the "portrait" which seeks to "characterize and express the personality and suggest the life behind the surface exhibited to the world; it employs a minimum of background, and, as in the painting of a potrait, frames the subject in a given position" (p. 127). Many young adult biographies belong in the portrait category. In the third type "the materials are melted down and...the biographer is present in the work as omniscient narrator" (p. 125). The latter borrows from the narrative techniques of the novelist and is but a step removed from fictional biography. As Edel points out, Lytton Strachey used the third technique: "He...so saturated himself with his documents that he may cut himself from their bondage without cutting himself free from their truth" (p. 131).

Truth remains a vital element in biography of any kind, though this has not always been practiced. We now know, for example, that Parson

Weems endowed George Washington with legendary honesty through the cherry tree episode. I grew up thinking Pocahontas really did save John Smith's life, but historians now believe otherwise. Inspirational portraits of heroes have been familiar in biographies for young readers in the past, but more recently we have a call not only for more objectivity but also for more balance in subjects to include women and minorities.

Publishers have much to say about the nature of the biographies they publish for young readers. Viking's new "Women of Our Times" series to be launched in May features biographies of Babe Didrikson, Dorothea Lange, Diana Ross, and Eleanor Roosevelt. I have read advance copies of these, and while the intended audience is the 7-11 age range, I find them quite suitable for older readers. With a 64-page format, including photographs, these books avoid controlled vocabulary and stress good writing. All quotes and anecdotes must be verifiable, and the subjects are presented "warts and all," but without being salacious. Future books in the series will feature Betty Friedan, Margaret Thatcher, Mary McLeod Bethune, Grandma Moses, Dolly Parton, and Mother Teresa. The series offers "carefully documented life stories that will inform, entertain, and inspire the young people of our time."

I inquired at Franklin Watts about their Impact series and their Picture Life series, and I learned that subjects for biographies in either series must be individuals who have "played a significant role in influencing life in the twentieth century." Their favorite titles with young readers are biographies of John Lennon, Martin Luther King, Jr., Jackie Robinson, and Adolf Hitler. You can see that these have been people involved in some kind of controversy. That Hitler is a

a familiar name among the list of many publishers bothers me, but the continued emphasis on the horrors on the Holocaust helps explain this interest. I shudder to think otherwise.

I might add here that biography for young readers may be found in the comic book realm. Marvel Comics is now distributing copies of Mother Teresa of Calcutta, no doubt inspired by the success of its earlier "biocomic" (Time, January 28, 1985) on Pope John Paul II. Marvel is also considering the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., Abraham Lincoln, and Anne Frank.

Biography received a special boost recently through the success of the film Amadeus. I know one high school teacher who recently had her class read the edited version of Peter Shaffer's stage play (Literary Cavalcade, October 1, 1983) before the students went to see the movie. Through these her students came to have a greater awareness of Mozart and his work. It is important to remember that in Shaffer's script we are seeing Mozart through the eyes of Antonio Salieri, who views this brash young genius as his enemy. Who is the real Mozart? I recommend Marcia Davenport's excellent biography Mozart (Charles Scribner's Sons, 1932; Avon, 1979) if you would like to have a less jaundiced view of the man. Davenport has researched her subject thoroughly, and in her Foreward, she feels confident in claiming: "So I think I know what he looked like, how he spoke, what he did day by day. I have combined this knowledge of him with conscientious study of his known life, and have set down in a continuous record what I believe to have happened" (Scribner's, 1932, p. vii).

In talking about Amadeus with young people, I keep hearing them say how easily they can relate the Mozart of film to the present scene

in music. One told me of seeing an Amadeus video in which scenes from the movie were juxtaposed with shots of contemporary performers in action. The past thus lives in the present for these viewers, and a great musician comes alive in the process. Who the real Mozart is can never be known to us, but we can have some dominant impressions to play with through the combination of film and print.

The biographical process has been characterized in various ways. James Boswell said in his life of Johnson

> Indeed I cannot conceive of a more perfect mode of writing any man's life, than not only relating all the most important events of it in their order, but interweaving what he privately wrote, and said, and thought; by which mankind are enabled as it were to see him live, and to live over each scene with him, as he actually advanced through the several stages of his life.

In Literary Biography Leon Edel describes the process as "a kind of alchemy of the spirit: to succeed the biographer must perform the unusual--and well-nigh impossible--act of incorporating into himself the experience of another, or shall we say, becoming for a while that other person, even while remaining himself. . . . All biography is, in effect, a reprojection into words, into a literary or a kind of semiscientific and historical form, of the inert materials, reassembled, so to speak through the mind of the historian or the biographer" (p. 13).

When the biographer has done his or her work well, the result is a reading experience that can, in the words of Jo Carr, "make us think deeply" and "make us feel deeply" ("Writing the Literature of Fact," in Jump Over the Moon, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1984, p. 205). We have

to help our students find those biographies that will accomplish this, biographies that present interesting people honestly and accurately in a readable style. There are many to choose from, so the task may not always be easy, but the rewards for young readers and for us are worth the effort.